shrI dayA shatakam – An Introduction

shrI vedAnta deshikar, a profound scholar, an unparalleled poet, a supreme devotee (bhakta), and an impeccable mentor who lived about 750 years back, has composed one hundred and eight shloka-s on Lord shrinivAsa of tiruve~NkaTam. It is called shrI dayA shatakam. As the name implies, it focuses primarily on the greatest unsurpassable quality of bhagavAn called dayA, which is also known by other synonyms – kAruNyam, vAtsalyam etc. A rough English translation would be - pity, mercy, grace, empathy, kindness, or compassion. shatakam means one hundred shloka-s, though in many instances it is stretched to hundred and eight for auspicious reasons, such as in this case.

vishiShTAdvaita, an unique age-old philosophy in the Hindu religion that has been cherished by many revered saints (AzhvAr-s), scholars (guru-s and AcArya-s), philosophers and poets, especially in South India. The fulcrum for this doctrine is the simple, but powerful body-soul relationship between God, man and nature (Ishvaran, cit and acit). The supreme Ishvaran supports, controls and owns (Adheya, niyAmya, svAmitvam) every single thing in the universe and has unlimited power (paratvam). Yet, there is an equally, and possibly a greater quality (tirukkalyANa guNa) called mercy, which is also boundless, makes Him to be easily accessible by everyone (saulabhyam), despite His supremacy (paratvam). Please underscore the word “everyone”, here.

To make one eligible to receive this infinite compassion of the Lord, an amazing concept of prapatti, an unconditional total surrender at His lotus feet has been propagated by many authoritative texts (pramANam-s like veda-s etc.) as the only plausible means (upAyam). The basis for this prapatti doctrine is the unflinching conviction that the lord will pardon and bless when one stands in front of Him feeling helpless (Aki~ncanyam), with no other refuge (ananyagatitvam) and request for His protection. Veda-s claim “rakShA prekShAM pratIkShate” - one needs to pray to the lord to protect him and the lord is keenly waiting for that request.

The quality of nullifying sins (pApam-s), even if it amounts to infinite number carried over from millions of births (janma-s), and conferring the ultimate bliss (mokSham) has been glorified by lord KR^iShNa in his carama shlokam in bhagavadgItA (18-66) as ahaM tva sarva pApebhyo mokShayiShyAmi". To remove the evils (aniShTa nivR^itti) and confer the rewards (iShTa prApti), a single paramount character within bhagavAn called dayA has been solely responsible. That splendid character has been personified and extolled as dayAdevI by svAmi deshika in this dayA shatakam.

Even though dayAdevI, the primary focus of this stotra, has been portrayed as a separate entity, she is nothing but an attribute (tirukkalyANa guNa) of lord shrIman nArAyaNa, specifically bhagavAn shrInivAsa here, the arcA mUrti (idol form) commanding at tiruve~NkaTam. svAmi deshikan says this as "shrInivAsasya karuNAm iva rUpiNIm" - dayAdevI, you are nothing but the form of lord shrInivAsa's compassion.

We may even say, that dayA devI controls and commands the actions of the lord. Her svarUpa, rUpa and vibhUti are also sung in detail in this stotra. It is noteworthy to point out that this dayAlakShmI who is the embodiment of lord shrInivAsa's boundless compassion is different from the lord's inseparable consort shrI mahAlakShmI.

bhagavat rAmanuja unambiguously declared, "empirAnai solliya iDam ellAm piraTTiyaiyum solliRRAm" - wherever lord shrIman nArAyaNa has been mentioned, it is assumed that lakShmI is also mentioned implicitly in all those contexts. bhagavAn and pirATTi together is the inseparable single tattvam (midhunam). When we say lord nArAyaNa's compassion, it means pirATTi's compassion too. So dayA devI is nothing but the compassion of both of them, though in many places, it is referred as tiruve~NkaTamuDaiyAn's grace only. svAmi deshika explicitly confirms this in the last shloka of this dayA shatakam, "dInAlambana divya dampati dayA kallola kolAhalaH". It is the compassion of both the lord and pirATTi that has evolved as dayA devI, and that is the only means of support for the wretched and dejected souls who suffer immensely and infinitely in the samsAram (birth/death cycle).

Who is more compassionate, bhagavAn or pirATTi? This is always an interesting topic for constructive debate, from the angle of pure enjoyment (anubhavam) only. PeriyAzhvAr (ViShNucittar) in his tirumozhi says that even when shrI mahAlakShmI pretends to find fault with the individual souls (cetana-s) and complains to lord shrIman nArAyaNa, He rejects that and replies to her, "en aDiyAr adu seyyAr", My devotees will never commit those sins. It is indisputable fact that tAyAr shrI mahAlakShmI is the epitome of compassion and forgiveness. Here, the AzhvAr portrays that the lord's mercy is even one step superior to that. But the underlying concept one needs to understand is that when the lord gets angry, pirATTi comes to the rescue and vice versa. Thus the divya dampati (divine couple), the parents for all living things, are competing with each other to rescue the poor souls on the earth.

A good poet will be astute enough to realize that the main theme of the entire poem in the first verse itself. Some even accomplish that with the first line. But great ones need just the very first word to communicate that. svAmi deshika starts with the first word "prapadye" (surrendering) to emphasize succinctly the agenda for the rest of the poem. He followed the footsteps of nammAzhvAr, who started his tiruvAimozhi with the first word "uyarvaRa" meaning that the noble character (tirukkalyAna guNa-s) of the lord is greater than that of anyone else; tiruppANAzhvAr also started with the word amalan (The lord who has no flaws and has the ability and willingness to make everyone like that) to indicate that the lord is above all.

The 108 shloka-s in this stotra has been set with ten groups with eleven different meters (chandas). Each set of these 10 shloka-s are the essence of ten decads (pattu-s) [that is 10 shloka-s of dayA shatakam is mapped into 100 verses (pAsuram-s) of tiruvAimozhi].

The gist on each set of dayA shatakam is as follows

1. lord shrInivAsa is the one who can grant mokSham (mokShAnugraham)
2. He is all–knower (sarvaj~nan) and all-capable (sarva shaktan)
3. He crushes the enemies of his devotees

4. He is the means (upAyam) for all rewards (phalan)
5. He is all the rewards (phalan)
6. He can be attained through the celebrated path of prapatti
7. He will voluntarily mix and enjoy even with the lowest class, without any hesitation or inhibition
8. He is the supreme, standing on top of tirumalai hills
9. He is the one who has incarnated (avatAram-s) as shrI rAma and shrI kR^iShNa
10. To those who have surrendered to Him (done prapatti), He is the one who blesses the ultimate bliss (mokShAnandam), here on the earth itself.

In shrImat bhAgavatam, shuka brahmam is addressing parIkShit mahArAja and says, "na mamAra ditergarbhaH shrInivAsAnukampayA bahudhA kulisha-kShuNNo drauNy-astreNa yathA bhavAn (6-18-65)", that is, "hey rAjan! You were burned by the brahmAstra of ashvattAma, but lord shrInivAsa (note here, it is not KR^iShNa that was mentioned explicitly) with His endless kindness entered your mother's womb and saved you". svAmi deshikan uses the same word shrInivAsa anukampayA in the first shloka itself. The word usage may not be that striking, except when one analyzes the meaning of that word. anukampe means literally shivering. The lord Himself is shaking when he is approached by a shivering cetana (an individual soul) in distress. When the all-powerful lord Himself is shaking, one can imagine how much of this dayA bhAvam (emotion) He must have towards those who reach His lotus feet!

Finally, an interesting message on how svAmi deshika begins and ends this dayA shatakam. He starts with the first shloka as "ikShu sAra sravantya iva taM girim" - the dayA of lord tiruve~NkaTamuDaiyAn is like the river of sugarcane juice which has been frozen as tirumalai hills. He concludes in the last shloka as kallola kolAhalaH - the same dayA flows torrentially. For devotees who have just begun to learn, recite and enjoy this dayA shatakam, the lord's compassion may initially be like a frozen mountain, but as he continues on to complete the recitation (pArAyaNam) with deep devotion, the same compassion of the lord which was in the solid form will melt away like a liquid; more importantly, it will

turn into a huge torrential downpour and will flood all parts of the devotee's heart with divine grace.